

Ridin' Out the Storm

A Galac-Tac Chronicle – Episode 19

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Weather Report: 3500-16

“Are you sure we’re allowed to do this?” I asked.

“After all these years, you’re suddenly concerned about regs?” Shelandra asked.

“About getting caught,” Rex said. “As always.”

“*You* in particular,” I said to Shelandra.

“It’ll be fine,” she said. I noticed that didn’t exactly answer my question, but I didn’t press the issue.

She brought up a form on a datapad and held it out to Rex, then to me. We each applied our thumb print, acknowledging we would be responsible for Vance for the next eight hours, until zero hundred. At the moment, Vance was storing supplies in the walk-in freezer behind us.

“Just remember he has to be either in the kitchen or his quarters at all times, and can’t be left alone for more than a few minutes.” She saved the form. “Thanks for being my wingmen.”

“Eh, you deserve a night off,” Rex said, smiling.

“How you spending it?” I asked.

“With Jerry.” She breezed out the door.

Rex and I just stood there staring at the door, feeling the same thing.

“She’s a big girl,” Rex finally said.

“Yeah, but...why do I trust Jerry with everything but her?”

Rex laughed. “Shelandra knows what she’s doing. Maybe instead of worrying about her, we should worry about Jerry.”

I laughed also, realizing that was a great way of looking at it.

The comms pinged. Rex shoved the soup crates aside to answer it (the ship designers had put the comms relay in the most inconvenient place possible). It was Janice and Veronica.

Hey guys, the message read. We’re off duty tonight. Wanna come to our quarters later? Followed by a little heart emoji.

Rex and I shared a look of deep, deep resentment.

Gritting his teeth, Rex angrily sent back: *Can’t. Stuck here all evening.*

We spoke softly so Vance couldn’t hear, because we didn’t want him to think he was a burden (even though that night, he totally was).

While peeling potatoes:

“We could just go,” Rex said. “Vance is perfectly fine alone.”

"The officers sometimes do surprise checkups. We can't risk it."

While frying the sausage:

"What if we used the same form Shelandra did and fobbed him onto someone else?" I asked.

"Dude, I'm 99% certain Shelandra made up that form."

"So? It worked on us, it would work on them!"

"Okay, but name anyone else on this ship willing to do it honestly."

While washing the pans:

"I got it," I said. "We mutiny, put everyone adrift in lifeboats, and find a nice planet where we can all settle down."

"That's just an idea. Let me know when you have a workable plan."

Lounging around the empty mess hall after dinner:

We had nothing to say.

Luckily, Vance, being from a different species, didn't seem to notice anything amiss. We all just stared out the viewport at the ghostly, undulating ribbons of soft white-on-black-on-white of hyperspace. Neither the strange ribbons nor their glow were even real, according to our scientists, which I've never understood. It was just the way we perceived hyperspace, and we couldn't see the rest of the fleet even though we knew (or had faith) that they were flying right next to us. Those ribbons always sent slow-moving patterns of soft light through the viewport. We were en route to attack our first enemy colony world, but we had no idea which one.

Then Janice and Veronica came in. Our evening brightened considerably.

"Well, you couldn't come to us, so we came to you," Janice said as they sat.

"How'd you score a night off?" Rex asked.

Veronica shrugged. "Dunno. They just gave it to us."

"What exactly do you two do, anyway?" I asked.

"Formally, it's called O&P," Janice said. "Observation and Participation."

Rex snorted. "The army gave your duties an official name?"

"They give soap dispensers official names," I said. "Sanitary Retrieval Units."

"Really?" Vance asked.

I shrugged. "Probably."

"We always breakfast with the officers," Janice said. "Then we observe, without touching, various procedures, usually on the bridge."

"And it's always useless stuff," Veronica said. "Like, today they taught us how the duty officer assigns shifts for the next week. Information we literally will never use in our lives."

"We even had to take notes," Janice said.

"It's a polite way to keep us occupied and pretending to feel useful," Veronica said. "Even though it's stupid, honestly, I appreciate the effort."

"If they ever get desperate for things to show you, you could end up in the kitchen one day," Rex said.

"Taking notes," I said.

Janice stuck her tongue out, while Veronica said, "Desperate indeed!"

"Where are Shelandra and Jerry?" Janice asked.

"On a daaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaate," Rex said.

Veronica gave us a funny look. "And how do you feel about that?"

"Why do you ask?" I said.

Janice laughed. "It's waaaay obvious how you two feel protective of her!"

I felt my face turn a little red.

"Yeah, we do," Rex admitted. "Ever since we were kids."

"But we're coping," I said. "We're meeting our therapist tomorrow to help us adjust to our new reality."

"When you eat with the officers, have you heard anything useful?" Vance asked. "Anything about John's World, or the mysterious plans they have for you?"

"Nothing," Janice said, finally showing the worry I knew she was hiding. "Has Jerry made any progress?"

"Jerry's proceeding as slowly and as carefully as he can," I said. "But he hasn't found anything, either."

"I wish we could do something more," Rex said.

A voice came over the PA. "Yellow alert. Repeat: yellow alert. We will enter system 11-39 in five minutes."

"Oh," Veronica said. "That's why they gave us the night off. We're arriving at the first target and they didn't want us in the way."

"Aw, man," I said. "I think Jerry and Shelandra's date just got ruined." Despite my earlier feelings, I was genuinely sad.

This was rotten timing, and they deserved better.

"What's at 11-39?" Rex asked Vance.

He swiveled his two upper arms, which was his race's equivalent of a shrug. "Dunno. I don't remember which coordinates I scouted."

A few minutes later, the shifting lights coming through the viewport abruptly vanished. At the same time, we felt the familiar, tiny deceleration-then-acceleration-again movement which signified the drop out of hyperspace.

We gathered at the viewport. One red star was noticeably larger than all the others, probably three AUs away.

"Is this it?" Rex asked softly, nodding towards the star.

"No," Vance said. "John's World orbits a yellow sun. I don't recognize this system."

"Enemy supply ships and colony detected!" the voice over the PA said. "Red alert! Prepare to attack!"